

'Intel chief denounced Russia dossier' Claims Trump

Donald Trump has claimed US intelligence chief James Clapper called him to "denounce" an explosive dossier alleging links with Russia, despite an official statement hours earlier that said no judgement had been reached on the document's reliability. Clapper spoke with the President-elect on Wednesday evening to discuss the dossier - believed to have been compiled by a former British spy - that claims to show Russian intelligence agencies have compromising material about Trump. In a statement released after their conversation the director of national intelligence said: "The IC [intelligence community] has not made any judgement that the information in this document is reliable, and we did not rely upon it in any way for our conclusions."

But Trump used his first tweet yesterday morning - just a few hours later - to claim that the intelligence chief had instead rubbished the report. The incoming president wrote: "James Clapper called me yesterday to denounce the false and fictitious report that was illegally circulated. Made up, phony facts. Too bad!" A fresh row between the President-elect and America's most senior intelligence officer threatens to drive a deeper wedge between the agencies and Trump, who will be inaugurated on 20 January. In his New York news conference, Trump made clear that he suspected US intelligence agencies of releasing the 35-page dossier, saying it would be a "tremendous blot" on the agencies' reputation if they were shown to have leaked it. He earlier said they should "never have allowed this fake news to 'leak' into the public" and compared the intelligence agencies to Nazi Germany.



Lawmakers from ruling AK Party and the main opposition Republican People's Party scuffle during a debate on the proposed constitutional changes at the Turkish Parliament in Ankara, Turkey, yesterday. Turkish lawmakers approved three more articles in a hugely controversial bill bolstering the powers of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

NATO PROBE OF KUNDUZ AIRSTRIKE US forces killed 33 Afghans last year

Nato yesterday confirmed that US forces in Afghanistan killed 33 Afghan citizens "in self-defence" in Kunduz last year in a single incident highlighting civilian casualties, one of the most contentious issues of the 15-year campaign. The incident on November 3 saw US and Afghan troops call for air reinforcement as they engaged with Taliban forces hiding in civilian houses in a village in the volatile northern province. Civilian men, women and children were "likely inside the buildings from which the Taliban were firing", the report said. Two US forces and three Afghan commandos also died in the firing. The civilian deaths sparked outrage at the time, with victims' relatives parading the mutilated bodies of dead children piled into open trucks through the streets of Kunduz city. "The investigation determined, regrettably, that 33 civilians were killed and 27 others wounded," Nato's Afghan mission Resolute Support said in a statement. "To defend themselves and Afghan forces, US forces returned fire in self-defence at Taliban who were using civilian houses as firing positions," the statement added. "Regardless of the circumstances, I deeply regret the loss of innocent lives," said General John Nicholson, commander of US forces - Afghanistan. The United Nations has also launched an investigation, calling any loss of civilian life "unacceptable", with its findings due to be released by the end of this month.

Tillerson hits out at China

Says Beijing should be barred from its artificial islands in S China Sea, compares isle building with Russia's taking of Crimea

China offered a muted response yesterday after Donald Trump's secretary of state pick Rex Tillerson warned the US would stop it from using its artificial islands in the South China Sea. Tillerson's comments, during his confirmation hearing in the US senate, are the latest salvo the Trump team has aimed at Beijing. "We're going to have to send China a clear signal that, first the island building stops, and second, your access to those islands is also not going to be allowed," Tillerson told the panel. Beijing has fuelled regional tensions by turning tiny, ecologically fragile reefs and islets in the strategically vital South China Sea into artificial islands hosting military facilities. The former ExxonMobil chief said China's building in the disputed waters and its declaration of an air defence identification zone over the Japanese-controlled Senkaku islands in the East China Sea were "illegal actions". "They are taking territory or control or declaring control of territories that are not rightfully China's." Beijing asserts a claim to almost the whole of the South China Sea, based on a "nine-dash line" dating to 1940s-era maps.

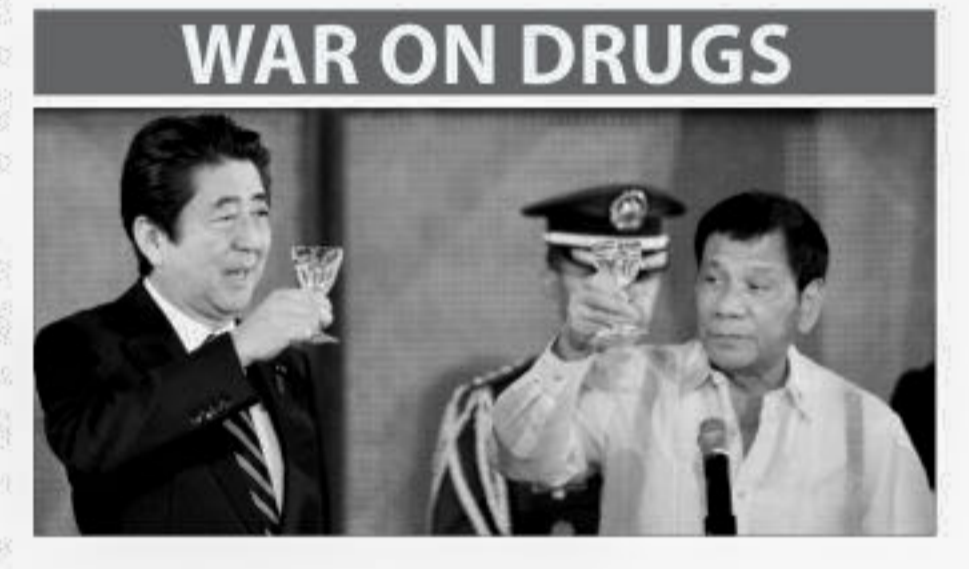
An international tribunal -- whose jurisdiction Beijing rejected -- ruled last year that there was no legal basis to such claims. Tillerson added that "building islands and then putting military assets on those islands is akin to Russia's taking of Crimea." Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang offered a measured response to the comments during a regular press briefing, saying that China has "the full right" to conduct activities in the region. "The South China Sea situation has cooled down and we hope non-regional countries can respect the consensus that it is in the fundamental interest of the whole world," he said. Taken at face value Tillerson's threat to deny access to China is not a "credible objective" for the US and may be "counterproductive", Rory Medcalf, head of the National Security College at the Australian National University told AFP. The US has military power in Asia but relatively few ships, he said, making a blockade unrealistic, and "it's very difficult to imagine the means by which the United States could prevent China from accessing these artificial islands without provoking some kind of confrontation".



Abe offers support to Philippines' Duterte

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday offered support for Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's controversial drug war as the pair met in Manila for talks that also focused on territorial disputes with China. Abe's two-day visit to the Philippines is the first by a foreign leader since Duterte took office in the middle of last year, highlighting Japan's importance as the Southeast Asian nation's top trading partner and foreign aid donor. Abe is also intent on maintaining Japan's strong ties with the Philippines as Duterte shakes up his nation's foreign policy with a shift away from the United States, both nations' longtime ally, in favour of China and Russia. The trip began with a warm welcome by Duterte at the presidential palace, with the Philippine leader then winning much sought-after backing for his drug war that has claimed about 6,000 lives and raised concerns of mass extrajudicial killings. "On countering illegal drugs, we want to work together with the Philippines to think of relevant measures of support," Abe said afterwards, according to an interpreter. Abe said Japan would help with unspecified drug "facilities" and treatment programmes. Duterte, who has railed against US President Barack Obama and European politicians for criticising his drug war, highlighted Abe's offers of support.

As the Philippines pursues its campaign to destroy the illegal drug trade apparatus, we welcome the expression of interest of Japan to support measures to address the tremendous social cost of drug addiction," Duterte said. Duterte won last year's elections in a landslide after vowing that 100,000 people would be killed in an unprecedented crackdown against illegal drugs. Since then police have reported killing 2,180 people in anti-drug operations. More than 3,000 others have been killed in unexplained circumstances, according to official figures.



Remedios Dayalino (seated) along with other former Filipina comfort women listen to speeches during a protest in front of the Japanese embassy in Manila yesterday, hours before a visit by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Ban hints at presidency run

Returns to S Korea as Park faces corruption trial

Retired UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday returned to South Korea as momentum builds around his possible run in elections to succeed impeached President Park Geun-hye. "I have seriously considered and thought about how I can put my experience and knowledge as a UN Secretary General to best use," Ban said in televised remarks after his arrival. Speaking before a crowd of hundreds at Incheon International Airport, Ban said he was prepared to meet with the public this week before making a "selfless decision". Ban's return comes at a time of national uncertainty with tens of thousands of people marching in weekly protests demanding the permanent removal of scandal-hit Park, who was impeached by parliament last month over a corruption scandal. If the Constitutional Court upholds the parliamentary vote, Park will be permanently removed and elections held within 60 days. "It breaks my heart," said Ban, referring to the ongoing political turmoil.

"We must never forget the people's desire that was expressed on the streets." A career diplomat, Ban never joined any South Korean political party, although he served as foreign minister under the late liberal president Roh Moo-hyun from 2004 to 2006. It remains unclear whether Ban will join Park's ruling Saenuri Party or the emerging conservative party. Saenuri Party floor leader Chung Woo-Taik "sincerely" welcomed Ban's return through a Facebook post yesterday, calling him "the pride and national asset of South Korea". The former UN secretary general has a 20.3 percent approval rating according to a poll released yesterday. Further troubling his political aspirations, Ban's younger brother and nephew were indicted in a US court this week over an alleged attempt to bribe a Middle Eastern official regarding the sale of a building in Vietnam. However Ban has denied any involvement, saying he was "perplexed and embarrassed" by the situation.



NEWS IN brief

- Indian soldier kills four colleagues**
AFP, New Delhi
A paramilitary soldier from one of India's elite security units shot dead four of his senior officers yesterday in an apparent row over leave, police said. The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) soldier fired indiscriminately at the officers at the barracks in Aurangabad district in eastern India's Bihar state before trying to flee.
- Pak stays execution of mentally ill man**
AFP, Islamabad
A Pakistani court yesterday stayed the execution of a schizophrenic man, his lawyers said, days before he was set to face the gallows. Khizar Hayat, a 55-year-old former police officer, was sentenced to death in 2003 for shooting a colleague. The United Nations has previously called on Pakistan to protect mentally ill inmates, singling out Hayat as having "psychosocial disabilities".
- Nepal names new quake reconstruction chief**
REUTERS, Kathmandu
Nepal fired the head of its earthquake reconstruction agency and named his predecessor to the job in a game of musical chairs that critics say is only making conditions worse for the survivors of the 2015 disaster. Thousands of homeless people remain in temporary shelters after the 2015 quakes that left 9,000 people dead and destroyed more than 626,000 homes, monuments and other structures.

Norway switches off FM radio

Norway has become the first country to switch off FM radio despite concerns about the move being premature. The northern county of Nordland stopped broadcasting using analogue frequencies on Wednesday as the Government plans to roll out digital-only radio over the course of the year. Oslo hopes the measure will save 200 million Norwegian kroner (£19 million) a year as the country has struggled to make sure its ageing FM equipment still emits signals over its vast, sparsely populated territory, which is covered in signal-blocking fjords and forests. Stephen Lax, a lecturer in Communication Technology at the University of Leeds, told the New Scientist that Norway's geography made analogue radio transmission particularly difficult. He said: "Norway has many mountains and valleys that the robust nature of DAB can help with." "Additionally, its FM radio infrastructure was coming to the end of its life, so they would've needed to either replace it or fully commit to DAB anyway." The government estimates that 70 percent of Norwegian households already have a digital set and pointed out the country has 26 DAB stations but only five on FM.

US, Australian hostages appear in Taliban video

An American and an Australian have appeared in a Taliban hostage video, five months after they were kidnapped from Kabul. Gunmen wearing police uniforms abducted American Kevin King and Australian Timothy Weekes, both professors at the American University of Afghanistan, on August 7, seizing them from their vehicle after smashing the passenger window. The 13-minute, 35-second video circulated by Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid on Wednesday offers the first apparent proof that they were still alive. Australia said yesterday it "has been working closely with other governments to secure the release" of the hostage, but would not elaborate citing his family's wishes and safety concerns.

Pakistan raises objections

A week after India conducted an Agni-IV test, Pakistan yesterday conveyed its "concern" about New Delhi's missile programme to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), saying that it posed "a danger to regional peace and stability," The Express Tribune reported. The MTCR is a group of 35 states that have voluntarily agreed to prevent missile proliferation by adhering to common export policy guidelines related to missile technologies. Pakistan conveyed its "concerns" to an MTCR delegation which is in Pakistan to meet with foreign affairs ministry officials. Pakistan reportedly said India's introduction of "destabilising systems such as missile defence programmes and inter-continental ballistic missiles was posing a danger to regional peace and stability", The Express Tribune wrote. These Pakistan statements come after India last week conducted its final test of the Agni-IV inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM). That test came close on the heels of the successful test-firing of Agni-V. Agni-IV can travel 4,000 kilometres and Agni-V has a range of more than 5,000 kilometres and can reach Europe and the northern-most parts of China. In a clear reference to India, a Pakistani foreign ministry official "highlighted the risks posed to regional peace and stability due to the introduction of destabilizing systems such as missile defence programmes and inter-continental ballistic missiles." Pakistan said its proposal on establishing a Strategic Restraint Regime in South Asia, which covers nuclear and missile restraint remains, on the table. "Pakistan believes that progress on this proposal through meaningful dialogue can promote peace and stability in the region," the foreign ministry official said. A statement issued by Pakistan's foreign office said the agenda for talks with the MTCR delegation included the latest political and technical developments in the grouping. "Pakistan's export control regime is at par with the best international standards and its national control lists encompass the items and technologies controlled by the MTCR," a foreign ministry official told the delegation.



INDIA'S AGNI-IV TEST